Consumption Modes and Lifestyles: when the Ones' Understanding help to better grasp the Others

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The fact that The *Nordic Historical Review* has devoted an issue to consumption and lifestyle, including in all their most current forms, might seem surprising. In fact, the Nordic countries have often been considered as among the countries most concerned to display the most complete equality possible among their citizens---thereby reducing the mechanisms of distinction and imitation that manifest through consumption and the affirmation of specific lifestyles. Moreover, the Protestant Ethic that characterizes these countries seems to prevent any tendancy towards conspicuous consumption and promotes a certain strictness of lifestyle and an irreprochable ethic. The "egalitarian temptation" (Simoulin, 1999, pp. 50-52) which has long seemed to characterise these countries, has also given rise to important debates and sometimes to violent criticisms, culminating with Roland Huntford's book, *The New Totalitarians*.

Perhaps this image has always been rather excessive. After all, it is probably not by accident that the very concept of "conspicuous comsumption" was developed in 1899 by an American scholar of Norwegian origin, Thorstein Veblen, in his theory of the leisure class. In fact, we project a sort of image of rigour and asceticism onto Nordic citizens that is probably exagerrated and that, moreover, partially contradicts their image as pioneers of sexual and gender liberation which we attribute to them as well. Although it is a much older image, prior to the Reformation, it is probably worth recalling that the Vikings as they are described by Regis Boyer were of course very attached to the practical and functional nature of clothing and objects, but were equally concerned about aesthetics, appearance, and, in the end, a certain level of distinction:

> "Whether for women or men, we cannot help but appreciate the functional value of [Viking] clothing, as well as its 'do everything' character. Whether fishing, working, or forging iron, the person's movements are free.… If we can believe the contemporary sagas, Vikings were very concerned about their appearance. Full portraits are rare in these texts, but where they exist, careful attention is always paid to dress, and it is not unheard of to find elegant people or even 'dandies' in the texts.… I have noticed that Vikings must have been sensitive to

> outer appearances … There was a noticeable predilection for precious fabrics: velvet, silk, and above all, 'scarlet' cloth[1]… Moreover, as I have already indicated, Vikings took great notice of foreign fashions." (Boyer, 1992, pp. 100-102)[2]

We find this same combination of a concern for functionality as well as aesthetics, perhaps typical of the Nordic region, in several of the articles in this volume—which show us at what point we have probably lived with an incorrect image of these countries. What is more, this image is likely even more false today that it was before, because the Nordic countries have changed and are still changing. As each issue of this journal reminds us, they no longer are what they once were: these temples of social-democracy have converted to neo-liberalism faster and more completely than we would have believed possible; the heralds of neutrality and of balance between Eastern and Western Europe are now at the forefront of NATO or have a dominant role in it; homogenous and isolated peoples have become multicultural nations—we can multiply the examples. It is thus hardly surprising that, in Nordic countries as elsewhere, the differences among lifestyle and consumption patterns that were hardly admissible before, are today not only visible but have even tended to increase. Where before the 'People's Home' reigned, to use the former Swedish Prime Minister Per Albin Hansson's phrase, other rationales have now developped and the emphasis has changed from the equality of services to the quality of services, from equality as uniformity to the freedom to be different, etc.

Our goal is to revisit these questions by giving an overview both of the variety of Nordic consumption practices and the richness of the research that deals with them, and by showing the ways in which global patterns of consumption and cultural developments are interrelated. In so doing, this issue situates itself within the transformations in the social sciences of the last fifteen to twenty years, in which a particular interest has been taken in objects on the one hand, and on the other hand, the methods enabling us to understand them. Photographs appear here as a source of information about human lifestyles and uses which has been neglected in the past. As for the objects themselves, they are less perceived as passive instruments and more as essential vectors of culture and social change. The fact that this issue is dedicated to consumption patterns and lifestyles is perfectly in keeping with this double perspective, as consumption is by nature focused on the object and also has an international nature.

The authors of this issue, although there are too few of them to fully represent the broader and more diversified community of Nordic writers and/or specialists of Scandinavia, provide us with a good overview of the exchanges and transformations at work. These authors have the "Nordic touch," in that they are attentive to the specificities of the countries being studied, but at the same time they are experts who are well integrated into the international community. They examine consumption as a practice whose issues and dynamics are impossible to restrict to one single geographical area, since contemporary consumerism reflects developments whose scale is European or even global. The interest of these studies is precisely their location at the intersection of these two dynamics, local and international—seen in the frequent use of international analytical frameworks such as the anthropology of science and technology (Hagberg, Hansson, Sommerlund, Shove and Pantzar), and also in the fact that their research is firmly rooted within Nordic context.

In terms of institutionalising certain patterns of consumption as specifically Nordic practices (or vice versa), the article by Unni Kjærnes and Runar Døving offers a fascinating example of the unexpected links that exist between daily life and cultural and institutional frameworks. By following the historical developments and changes in the *matpakke*, a typically Norwegian sandwich that has become a genuine institution, even a symbol of national identity, the authors show how the most ordinary food can

[1] Translator's note: a kind of luxury woollen cloth, sometimes dyed with vermillion.

[2] Translated from the French edition by the translator.

serve as focal point, both for the implementation of social and public health policies concerned about "welfare," as well as for the expression of values unique to the population, such as simplicity, health and the strict division between the spheres of work and leisure. Of course, the implementation of policies and the expression of particular values also change over time, and their transformations are interconnected.

Other forms of identifying practices as particularly Nordic are even more material, since they concern spatial characteristics and, in particular, Nordic buildings, as shown in the articles by Johan Hagberg on door-to-door sales in Sweden, by Jenny Lee on market halls in Stockholm, and by Virginia Amilien on Norwegian kitchens.

Diving into the history of door-to-door selling in Sweden, as Johan Hagberg's article invites us to do, illustrates particularly well the ambiguity of practices that, on one hand necessarily depend on the existing roadways and the topographical features of Sweden, marked by the wide expanse of its territory, its rural character and low population density, and on the other hand, the gradual integration of technical solutions such as e-commerce, closely intertwined with a movement of international integration and rationalization.

We find the same kind of dynamic with the market hall becoming part of the landscape and the history of Stockholm as Jenny Lee describes. The rise, decline and revival of this form of selling is inseparably linked to urban policies specific to the Swedish capital, to the changing forms of distribution and consumption practices, to social transformations of the population, and of course to broader movements which were sometimes focused on practices of distinction, and sometimes (more recently) on the search for authenticity and a healthy and environmentally-friendly diet.

Finally, this same kind of institutionalisation of practices as 'Nordic' is also found in the domestic sphere, once the shopping has been done, and particularly in the kitchen area where the goods are prepared and consumed and where the family gathers to express and construct their identity. Ethnographical research on the renovation of twenty Norwegian kitchens conducted by Virginia Amilien, is fascinating in that, by focusing on the rare moment when a radical transformation occurs in a space that is normally characterized by its permanence and its stability, the authors have found a way to capture the change in the aspirations of Norwegian households. For example, these families expressed a particular desire for light, but also concerns about functionality, and even a surprising blend of conformity and distinction.

Conversely, as opposed to consumption practices firmly rooted in the Nordic sphere, the contributions of Lena Hansson, Orsi Husz and Helene Brembeck analyze the Nordic appropriation of transnational consumption patterns.

Lena Hansson presents a style of design whose origin is certainly not Swedish: universal design. Through a detailed analysis of the introduction of new artefacts (such as simplified remote controls, hands-free faucets ...) and the connections that are created with humans that allow these objects to be used, her article shows that the introduction of these objects in Sweden nevertheless possessed a particular social sensitivity. The latter is characterized by the attention given to including the less fortunate members of society, to the point that, ultimately, the promotion of universal forms of usage was paradoxically rooted in a strong national culture and reveals a genuine political and moral ambition.

We find the same kind of concern in Orsi Husz's article on the controversy over the promises and dangers of the culture of "disposable" objects, a debate which influenced Swedish consumerism during the 1960s. This debate was driven by the highly-publicized battle between the emblems of each side, the traditionalist, W.M. Lungberg and the modernist, Lena Larssson. On the one hand, this debate was clearly

inspired by the clear Americanization of Swedish consumption which grew stronger during this period. On the other hand, this same debate was also an opportunity for the vigorous affirmation of elements particular to Swedish culture and institutions, like the cooperative movement, women's advocacy associations, and, in the end, a rather special attachment to objects—all distinct from American consumerism that was more focused on the conflicting interests of businesses and consumers.

In a similar manner but during a more contemporary period, the interesting study by Helene Brembeck on the adaptation of McDonald's restaurants to the Swedish market shows that, far from being the standardization machine described by George Ritzer (1998), McDonald's makes considerable efforts to adjust to the supposed preferences of its customers. In this case, they offered toys that were more respectful of gender equality, they added an eductional dimension to Happy Meal toys, and they put the focus on health by introducing baby carrots. This research raises questions about the ability of consumption not to generalize transnational models or to preserve local culture, but rather to "enact" global visions of the local, that is to say, to shape the behaviors that are being expressed.

Based on cases taken from Finland, Denmark and Iceland (respectively), the last three texts develop upon the same questions by focusing on the timing of innovation, fashion and news.

Elizabeth Shove and Mika Pantzar recount how a universal practice, walking, was reinvented in the form of "Nordic walking," a method of athletic transport with walking sticks invented in Finland. It then became "Nordic" through the affiliation with a sporting tradition linked to snow and cross-country skiing, and then international, by combining the expertise of Finnish marketing and the rationales of appropriation from other countries.

Julie Sommerlund analyzes Danish fashion, a field particularly suited to tracing the link between general "trends" and practices situated in one area, but also to capturing the identity and the fragility of rationales of consumption. She shows that Danish fashion, while sharing the codes and rhythms of international fashion, nevertheless is implicitly linked to the history of "Danish modern" style. This style is focused on material well-being, and follows in a particularly flexible way the ever-changing lifestyle of Danish women who, more than elsewhere, alternate roles as mothers and professionals, and are therefore looking for comfortable and versatile clothing.

Finally, Gérard Lemarquis plonges us into the heart of the reconfiguration of Icelandic consumption following the economic and financial crisis that hit Iceland hard in late 2008. He first describes the unbridled consumerism in Iceland before the crisis, whose specificity was, paradoxically, to exaggerate practices borrowed from the American model. He then discusses the dramatic modifications which have occurred since the crisis, such as new behaviors of self-production, of making do without, and of savings. This double portrait shows how consumption, in Iceland or elsewhere, is more a melting pot where national identities and social practices are invented, rather than the simple projection of them.

Ultimately, while the lands visited in the articles gathered here are Nordic, they help us discover that what these countries can contribute is not so much the specific objects of consumption, but rather the ideas and movements that inform them. These ideas and movements are at the same time national and yet easily exchangeable to other countries, and they enable us to argue for the importance of cultural exchange without reducing the content of that exchange to stereotypes.

Allow us to conclude this presentation by highlighting the prominent role played by the translators of some of these articles. We would like to particularly express our appreciation to Nathalie Blanc-Noël and Annelie Jarl-Ireman, who greatly assisted in finalising the translations and some of the articles as well. Moreover, readers of this issue will undoubtably benefit from reading the article in issue 11 of our journal that Natalie Blanc-Noël devoted to Arne Naes, a well-known Norwegian specialist on ecology and critic of consumerist society.

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